Objectives

1. Describe five human differences that influence communication.
2. Define culture.
3. Identify cultural elements, values, and contexts.
4. Discuss barriers that inhibit effective intercultural communication.
5. Identify strategies for developing knowledge, motivation, and skills that can improve intercultural competence.

Outline

- Understanding Diversity: Describing Our Differences
- Understanding Culture: Dimensions of Our Mental Software
- Barriers to Effective Intercultural Communication
- Improving Intercultural Communication Competence
Strangers, people different from us, stir up fear, discomfort, suspicion, and hostility. They make us lose our sense of security just by being ‘other’.

Henri J. M. Nouwen

His Indonesian-American half sister was there along with her Chinese-Canadian husband. Another family member, the rabbi, was there, too. If all family members from his past could have attended, you would have heard English, Indonesian, French, Cantonese, German, Hebrew, Swahili, Luo, Igbo, and Gullah, a Creole dialect of South Carolina’s Low Country. His Black father from Kenya, who was a Muslim, and his White Methodist mother from Kansas, both of whom had passed away, would no doubt have been proud to attend. The event? The inauguration of the 44th President of the United States, Barack Obama.

Diversity of culture, language, religion, and a host of other factors is increasingly commonplace in contemporary society. This diversity creates the potential for misunderstanding and even conflict stemming from the different ways we make sense out of the world and share that sense with others. In their book Communicating with Strangers, intercultural communication researchers William Gudykunst and Young Yun Kim point out that strangers are “people who are different and unknown.” Although as human beings we share many things in common, our interpersonal interactions with others make it obvious that many people look different from us and communicate in ways that are different from ours.

In the first three chapters, we acknowledged the influence of diversity on interpersonal relationships. In this chapter, we examine in more detail the impact that people’s differences have on their lives and suggest some communication strategies for bridging those differences in our interpersonal relationships. Our premise for this discussion of diversity is that in order to live comfortably in the twenty-first century, people must learn to appreciate and understand our differences instead of ignoring them, suffering because of them, or wishing that they would disappear.

Some people may be weary of what they perceive as an overemphasis on diversity. One student overheard a classmate say, “I’ve had it with all this diversity stuff. It seems like every textbook in every class is obsessed with it. I’m tired of all this politically correct nonsense. I mean, we’re all Americans. We’re not all going off to live in China. Why don’t they just teach us what we need to know and cut all of this diversity garbage?” Perhaps you’ve encountered this kind of “diversity backlash” among some of your classmates (or maybe you hold this attitude yourself). It may seem unsettling to some that textbooks are emphasizing cultural diversity. But this emphasis is not motivated by an irrational desire to be politically correct, but by the fact that the United States and other countries are becoming increasingly diverse. With this diversity comes a growing awareness that learning about differences, especially cultural differences, can affect every aspect of people’s lives in positive ways. You need not travel the world to interact with people who may seem strange to you; the world is traveling to you.

A central goal of your study of interpersonal communication is to learn how better to relate to others. Some of the differences that contribute to diversity and may interfere with developing relationships include differences in age, learning style, gender, religion, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, and culture. We will emphasize the role of cultural differences and how those differences affect our interpersonal communication while also noting a variety of ways in which we may seem strange to one another.
Understanding Diversity: Describing Our Differences

How are we different? Let us count the ways. No, let’s not—that would take up too much space! There are an infinite number of ways in which we are different from one another. Unless you have an identical twin, you look different from everybody else, although you may have some things in common with a larger group of people (such as skin color, hair style, or clothing choice). Communication researchers have, however, studied several major differences that affect the way we interact with one another. To frame our discussion of diversity and communication, we’ll note differences in gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, age, and social class. Each of these differences—some learned, some based on biology, economic status, or simply on how long someone has lived—has an effect on how we perceive others and interact with them. Following our discussion of some classic ways in which we are diverse, we’ll turn our attention to cultural differences and then note the barriers that cultural differences can create. We’ll conclude the chapter by identifying strategies to enhance the quality of interpersonal communication with others, despite our differences.
Sex and Gender

Perhaps the most obvious form of human diversity is the existence of female and male human beings. A person’s sex is determined by biology; only men can impregnate; only women can menstruate, gestate, and lactate. In contrast to sex differences, gender differences reflect learned behavior that is culturally associated with being a man or a woman. Gender role definitions are flexible: A man can adopt behavior associated with a female role in a given culture, and vice versa. Gender refers to psychological and emotional characteristics that cause people to assume masculine, feminine, or androgynous (having a combination of both feminine and masculine traits) roles. Your gender is learned and socially reinforced by others, as well as by your life experiences and genetics. Some researchers prefer to study gender as a co-culture (a subset of the larger cultural group). We view gender as one of many basic elements of culture.

In the predominant culture of the United States, someone’s gender is an important thing to know. Yet how different are men and women? John Gray, author of the popular book Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus, would have us believe that the sexes are so different from each other that we approach life as if we lived on two different planets. Communication researchers have challenged many of Gray’s stereotypical conclusions. Although researchers have noted some differences in the way men and women interact, to label all men and all women as acting in prototypical ways may cause us to assume differences that aren’t really there. Researchers who study gender and communication have found that gender differences are complex and not easily classified into tidy categories of “masculine” and “feminine” behaviors.

Deborah Tannen, author of several books on communication between the sexes, views men and women as belonging to different cultural groups. She suggests that female–male communication is cross-cultural communication, with all of the challenges of communicating with people who are different from us.

Research conclusions can result in uncertainty about sex and gender differences. Are there really fundamental differences in the way men and women communicate? Yes, some differences have been documented by researchers. But the differences may have more to do with why we communicate than how. There is evidence that men tend to talk in order to accomplish something or to complete a task. Women are often more likely to use conversation to establish and maintain relationships. There is a short way of summarizing this difference: Men often communicate to report; women often communicate to establish rapport. Research suggests that many men tend to approach communication from a content orientation, meaning that they view the purpose of communication as primarily information exchange. You talk when you have something to say. Women, research suggests, tend to use communication for the purpose of relating or connecting to others. So the point of difference isn’t in the way the sexes actually communicate but in their motivations or reasons for communicating. Note, however, that although gender differences account for considerable variation in how men and women view the world and the assumptions they hold about the nature of relationships, research suggests that cultural background is an even more powerful influence on some key assumptions about relationships.

Sexual Orientation

During the past two decades, gays and lesbians have become more assertive in expressing their rights within American society. Questions of whether gays and lesbians should participate in the military, the clergy, and the teaching profession have stirred the passions of many. Being gay or lesbian has become a source of pride...
for some, but it is still a social stigma for others. The incidence of suicide among gay
and lesbian teenagers is significantly higher than among heterosexual teens. Although gay people are gaining legal rights and protections, they are still subject to
discriminatory laws and social intolerance. Yet the gay and lesbian communities are
important co-cultures within the larger U.S. culture.

There is evidence that gay and lesbian individuals continue to be judged nega-
tively based solely on their sexual orientation. Research further suggests that hetero-
ssexuals who have negative perceptions of gays and lesbians are more likely to have
rigid views about gender roles and to assume that their peers also hold such rigid
views and negative impressions of gays and lesbians. In addition, those who hold
negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians are less likely to have interpersonal com-
munication with gays or lesbians. It is because of the existence of these negative atti-
dudes as well as anti-gay violence and harassment, that some gays and lesbians
continue to conceal their sexual orientation.

An effective and appropriate interpersonal communicator is aware of and sensi-
tive to issues and attitudes about sexual orientation in contemporary society. Homo-
ophobia, the irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexuality
and gays or lesbians, continues to exist among many people. Just as you have been
taught to avoid biased expressions that degrade someone’s race or ethnicity, it is
equally important to avoid using language that demeans a person’s sexual orientation.
Telling stories and jokes whose points or punch lines rely on cruelly ridiculing a per-
son because of his or her sexual orientation lowers perceptions of your credibility not
only among gay and lesbian people, but also among people who dislike any show of
bias against gays and lesbians.

Although we may not intend anything negative, sometimes we unintentionally
offend someone through more subtle use and misuse of language. For example, usu-
ally gays and lesbians typically prefer to be referred to as “gay” or “lesbian” rather than
“homosexual.” In addition, the term sexual orientation is preferred over sexual pre-
ference
when describing a person’s sexual orientation. Our language should reflect and acknowledge the range of human relationships that exist. Our key point is this: Be sensitively other-oriented as you interact with those whose sexual orientation is different from your own.

Race and Ethnicity

Racial and ethnic differences are often discussed and sometimes debated. According to *Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*, race is based on the genetically transmitted physical characteristics of a group of people who are also classified together because of a common history, nationality, or geographical location. A person’s racial classification is typically based on visible physiological attributes—phenotypes—which include skin color, body type, hair color and texture, and facial attributes. Skin color and other physical characteristics affect our responses and influence the way people of different races interact.

Although it may seem neat and tidy to classify individuals genetically as belonging to one race or another, it’s not quite that simple. One geneticist has concluded that there is much more genetic variation within a given racial category than between one race and another. There really aren’t vast genetic differences among people who have been assigned to racial categories. That’s why many scholars suggest that we think of race as a category that not only emphasizes biological or genetic characteristics, but also includes cultural, economic, social, geographic, and historical elements. The term race, therefore, is a fuzzy, somewhat controversial way of classifying people.

Ethnicity is a related term, yet scholars suggest it is different from race. Ethnicity is a social classification based on a variety of factors, such as nationality, religion, language, and ancestral heritage (race), that are shared by a group of people who also share a common geographic origin. Simply stated, an ethnic group is a group of people who have labeled themselves an ethnic group based on a variety of factors that may or may not include race. In making distinctions between race and ethnicity, Brenda Allen suggests that ethnicity refers to “a common origin or culture based on shared activities and identity related to some mixture of race, religion, language and/or ancestry.” Although ethnicity may include race, race is a separate category that is based on genetic or biological factors. But research has found those genetic or biological distinctions are not clear-cut. A key distinction between race and ethnicity is that one’s ethnicity is a socially constructed category.
that emphasizes culture and a host of other factors other than one’s racial or genetic background. Not all Asians (race), for example, have the same cultural background (ethnicity). Nationality and geographical location are especially important in defining an ethnic group. Those of Irish ancestry are usually referred to as an ethnic group rather than as a race. The same could be said of Britons, Norwegians, and Spaniards.

Ethnicity, like race, fosters common bonds that affect communication patterns. On the positive side, ethnic groups bring vitality and variety to American society. On the negative side, members of these groups may experience persecution or rejection by members of other groups in society.

One of the most significant problems that stem from attempts to classify people by racial or ethnic type is the tendency to discriminate and unfairly, inaccurately, or inappropriately ascribe stereotypes to racial or ethnic groups. **Discrimination** is the unfair or inappropriate treatment of other people based on their group membership. One of the goals of learning about diversity and becoming aware of both differences and similarities among groups is to eliminate discrimination and stereotypes that cause people to rigidly and inappropriately pre-judge others.

**Age**

Different generations, because they have experienced different cultural and historical events, tend to view life differently. If your grandparents or great-grandparents experienced the Great Depression of the 1930s, they may have different attitudes about savings accounts than you or even your parents do. Today’s explicit song lyrics may shock older Americans who grew up with such racy lyrics as “makin’ whoopee.” The generation gap is real and has implications for the relationships we develop with others.

Generational differences have an effect not just on communication with your parents or other family members, but on a variety of relationships, including those with teachers, merchants, bosses, and mentors. There is considerable evidence that people hold stereotypical views of others based on others’ perceived age. In addition, a person’s age has an influence on his or her communication with others. For example, one study found that older adults have greater difficulty in accurately interpreting the nonverbal messages of others than younger people do. Older adults also don’t like to be patronized or talked down to (who does?). And younger people seem to value social support, empathic listening, and being mentored more than older people do.

Authors Neil Howe and William Strauss, two researchers who have investigated the role of age and generation in society, define a generation as “a society-wide peer group, born over a period roughly the same length as the passage from youth to adulthood, who collectively possess a common persona.” Baby Boomers is the label for one such generation, people born between 1943 and 1960. Perhaps your parents or grandparents are Boomers. Generation X is the term used for people born between 1961 and 1981. If you were born between 1982 and 2002, you and your generation have been labeled Millennials. Researchers Howe and Strauss suggest that, as a group, “Millennials are unlike any other youth generation in living memory. They are more numerous, more affluent, better educated, and more ethnically diverse. More importantly, they are beginning to manifest a wide array of positive social habits that older Americans no longer associate with youth, including a focus on teamwork, achievement, modesty, and good conduct.” Table 4.1 summarizes labels for and common characteristics and values of several generational groups.
Your generation has important implications for interpersonal communication, especially as you relate to others in both family and work situations. Each generation has developed its own set of values, which are anchored in social, economic, and cultural factors stemming from the times in which the generation has lived. Our values, core conceptualizations of what is fundamentally good or bad, right or wrong, color our way of thinking about and responding to what we experience.

Generational and age differences may create barriers and increase the potential for conflict and misunderstanding.\(^\text{41}\) For example, one team of researchers who investigated the role of generations in the workforce suggests that Generation X workers are paradoxically both more individualistic (self-reliant) and more team-oriented than Boomers are.\(^\text{42}\) In contrast, Boomers are more likely to have a sense of loyalty to their employers, expect long-term employment, value a pension plan, and experience job burnout from overwork. Generation Xers, on the other hand, seek more of a balance between work and personal life, expect to have more than one job or career, value good working conditions over other job factors, and have a greater need to feel appreciated.\(^\text{43}\) Of course, these are broad generalizations and do not apply to all people in these categories.

### Social Class

The Constitution of the United States declares that all people are created equal, but there is dramatic evidence that class differences exist and affect communication patterns. Social psychologist Michael Argyle reports that the cues we use to identify class distinctions are (1) way of life, (2) family, (3) job, (4) money, and (5) education.\(^\text{44}\)
Brenda Allen suggests, “Social class encompasses a socially constructed category of identity that involves more than just economic factors; it includes an entire socialization process.” Such a socialization process influences the nature and quality of the interpersonal relationships we have with others. Although sociologists are the primary academic group of scholars who study social class, psychologists, business professionals, marketing specialists, and communication scholars also are interested in how a person’s social class has an effect on his or her thoughts and behavior. Class differences influence whom we talk with, whether we are likely to invite our neighbors over for coffee, and whom we choose as our friends and lovers. And research suggests that social class is used by advertisers to target sales pitches to specific types of people.

Some principles that describe how social classes emerge from society include the following:

1. Virtually every organization or group develops a hierarchy that makes status distinctions.
2. We are more likely to interact with people from our own social class. There seems to be some truth to the maxim “Birds of a feather flock together.”
3. People who interact with one another over time tend to communicate in similar ways; they develop similar speech patterns and use similar expressions.
4. Members of a social class develop ways of communicating class differences to others by the way they dress, cars they drive, homes they live in, schools they attend, and other visible symbols of social class.
5. It is possible to change one’s social class through education, employment, and income.

Differences in social class and the attendant differences in education and lifestyle affect whom we talk with and even what we talk about. These differences influence our overall cultural standpoint, from which we perceive the world.

Understanding Culture: Dimensions of Our Mental Software

We have noted a few of the fundamental ways people differ. Differences in gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, age, and social class contribute to an overall cultural perspective that influences on a fundamental level how we relate to others. As we discussed in Chapter 3, culture is a learned system of knowledge, behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, values, and norms that is shared by a group of people. In the broadest sense, culture includes how people think, what they do, and how they use things to sustain their lives. Researcher Geert Hofstede describes culture as the “mental software” that touches every aspect of how we make sense out of the world and share that sense with others. Just like software in a computer, our culture influences how we process information. To interact with other people is to be touched by the influence of culture and cultural differences.

Your culture and your life experiences determine your worldview—the general cultural perspective on such key issues as death, God, and the meaning of life that shapes how you perceive and respond to what happens to you. Your cultural worldview shapes your thoughts, language, and actions; it permeates all aspects of how you interact with society. You cannot avoid having a worldview. Our personal worldview is so pervasive
that we may not even be aware of it. Just as a fish may not be aware of the water in its fish bowl, you may not be aware of how your worldview influences every aspect of your life—how you see and what you think. Your worldview is one of the primary ways you make sense out of the world—it’s how you interpret what happens to you.

Sometimes when we speak of culture, we may be referring to a co-culture. A co-culture is a distinct culture within a larger culture. The differences of gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, age, and social class that we discussed earlier are co-cultures within the predominant culture. For example, about 80 percent of the population of the United States is classified as White, European, American, or Caucasian. Members of minority groups such as African Americans, Latinos, and Asians develop a co-culture, or what is sometimes called a microculture. The Amish, Mennonite, Mormon, Islamic, and Jewish religious groups are additional examples of important religious co-cultures. Often, because they are in the minority, members of a co-culture not only feel marginalized, they are marginalized in employment, education, housing, and other aspects of society. To enhance their power and self-identity, members of co-cultures may develop their own rules and norms. For example, teens develop their own slang, wear certain kinds of clothing, value certain kinds of music, and engage in other behaviors that make it easier for them to be identified apart from the larger culture.

Researchers and scholars who study culture have identified various dimensions or elements of culture. These dimensions provide a framework to describe how our culture influences us. These dimensions are not rooted in biology but are learned, passed on from parents to children. Enculturation is the process of transmitting a group’s culture from one generation to the next. You are not born with a certain taste in music, food, or automobiles. You learn to behave in accordance with the elements that characterize your culture and to appreciate the dimensions of your culture, just as you learn anything: through observing role models and receiving positive reinforcement.

The six dimensions of culture that we discuss here have been identified by researchers who have found them in all cultures that they have studied. Think of these dimensions as general ways of describing how culture is expressed in the behavior of groups of people. The six dimensions are (1) individualism (an emphasis on the individual) versus collectivism (an emphasis on the group); (2) an emphasis on the surrounding context, including nonverbal behaviors, versus little emphasis on context; (3) masculine values that emphasize accomplishment versus feminine values that emphasize nurturing; (4) degree of tolerance for uncertainty; (5) approaches to power; and (6) short- or long-term approaches to time.

**Individualism: One and Many**

One of the most prominent dimensions of a culture is the dimension of individualism versus collectivism. Individualistic cultures, such as those in North America, value individual achievement and personal accomplishment. Collectivistic cultures, including many Asian cultures, value group and team achievement. One researcher summed up the American goal system this way:

Chief among the virtues claimed . . . is self-realization. Each person is viewed as having a unique set of talents and potentials. The translation of these potentials into actuality is considered the highest purpose to which one can devote one’s life. \(^{50}\)
Conversely, in a collectivistic culture, people strive to attain goals for all members of the family, group, or community. In Kenyan tribes, for example,

[N]obody is an isolated individual. Rather, his [or her] uniqueness is a secondary fact. . . . In this new system group activities are dominant, responsibility is shared, and accountability is collective. . . . Because of the emphasis on collectivity, harmony and cooperation among the group tends to be emphasized more than individual function and responsibility.51

Individualistic cultures tend to be more loosely knit socially; individuals feel responsible for taking care of themselves and their immediate families.52 In collectivistic cultures, individuals expect more support from others; they also experience more loyalty to and from the community. Because collectivistic cultures place more value on “we” than “I,” teamwork approaches usually succeed better in their workplaces. U.S. businesses have tried to adopt some of Japan’s successful team strategies for achieving high productivity.

Context: High and Low

Individuals from different cultures use cues from the cultural context to varying degrees to enhance messages and meaning. This insight led anthropologist Edward T. Hall to categorize cultures as either high- or low-context.53 In high-context cultures, nonverbal cues are extremely important in interpreting messages. Low-context cultures rely more explicitly on language and use fewer contextual cues to send and interpret information. Individuals from high-context cultures may perceive people from low-context cultures as less attractive, knowledgeable, and trustworthy, because they violate unspoken rules of dress, conduct, and communication. Individuals from low-context cultures often are not skilled in interpreting unspoken, contextual messages.54

Gender: Masculine and Feminine

Some cultures emphasize traditional male values, whereas others place greater value on female perspectives. These values are not really about biological sex differences but about overarching approaches to interacting with others.

People from masculine cultures tend to value more traditional roles for both men and women. Masculine cultures also value achievement, assertiveness, heroism, and material wealth. Research reveals that men tend to approach communication from a content orientation, meaning that they view communication as functioning primarily for information exchange. Men talk when they have something to say. This is also consistent with the tendency of men to base their relationships, especially their male friendships, on sharing activities rather than talking.

Men and women from feminine cultures tend to value such things as caring for the less fortunate, being sensitive toward others, and enhancing the overall quality of life.55 Women, as research suggests, tend to approach communication for the purpose of relating or connecting to others, of extending themselves to other people in order to know them and be known by them.56 What women talk about is less important than the fact that they’re talking, because talking implies relationship.

Of course, rarely is a culture on the extreme end of the continuum; many are somewhere in between. For centuries, most countries in Europe, Asia, and the Americas have had masculine cultures. Men and their conquests dominate history books; men have been more prominent in leadership and decision making than women. But cultural context Aspects of the environment and/or nonverbal cues that convey information that is not explicitly communicated through language.

high-context culture Culture in which people derive much information from nonverbal and environmental cues.

low-context culture Culture in which people derive much information from the words of a message and less information from nonverbal and environmental cues.

masculine culture Culture in which people tend to value traditional roles for men and women, achievement, assertiveness, heroism, and material wealth.

feminine culture Culture in which people tend to value caring, sensitivity, and attention to quality of life.
today many of these cultures are moving slowly toward the middle—legal and social rules are encouraging more gender balance and greater equality between masculine and feminine roles.

**Uncertainty: High and Low Tolerance**

Some cultures tolerate more ambiguity and uncertainty than others. Cultures in which people need certainty to feel secure are more likely to create and enforce rigid rules for behavior and to develop more elaborate codes of conduct. People from cultures with a greater tolerance for uncertainty have more relaxed, informal expectations for others. “Go with the flow” and “It will sort itself out” are phrases that describe their attitudes. Research suggests that people from Portugal, Greece, Peru, Belgium, and Japan have high certainty needs, but people from Scandinavian countries tend to tolerate uncertainty.57

**Power: Centralized and Decentralized**

Some cultures value an equal, or decentralized, distribution of power, whereas others accept a concentration of hierarchical power in a centralized government and other organizations. In cultures in which people prefer a more centralized approach to power, hierarchical bureaucracies are common, and people expect some individuals to have more power than others. Russia, France, and China are all high on the concentrated power scale. Those that often strive for greater equality and distribution of power and control include many (but not all) citizens of Australia, Denmark, New Zealand, and Israel. People from these latter countries tend to minimize differences in power between people.

**Time: Short-Term and Long-Term**

A culture’s orientation to time falls on a continuum between long-term and short-term.58 People from a culture with a long-term orientation to time place an emphasis on the future and tend to value perseverance and thrift, because these are virtues that pay off over a long period of time. A long-term time orientation also implies a greater willingness to subordinate oneself for a larger purpose, such as the good of society or the group. In contrast, a culture that tends to have a short-term time orientation values spending rather than saving (because of a focus on the immediate rather than the future), tradition (because of the value placed on the present and the past), and preserving “face” of both self and others (making sure that an individual is respected and that his or her dignity is upheld) and has an expectation that results will soon follow the actions and effort expended on a task. Short-term cultures also place a high value on social and status obligations.

Cultures or societies with a long-term time orientation include many Asian cultures such as China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan. Short-term time orientation cultures include Pakistan, the Czech Republic, Nigeria, Spain, and the Philippines. Both Canada and the United States are closer to the short-term time orientation than the long-term time orientation, which suggests an emphasis on valuing quick results from projects and greater pressure toward spending rather than saving, as well as a respect for traditions.59
RECAP Understanding Culture: Dimensions of Our Mental Software

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<tr>
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Barriers to Effective Intercultural Communication

Interpersonal communication occurs when individuals or groups from different cultures communicate. The transactional process of listening and responding to people from different cultural backgrounds can be challenging. The greater the difference in culture between two people, the greater the potential for misunderstanding and mistrust. Research suggests that culture has a direct effect on how we communicate with one another.60 When we communicate with people who have different cultural backgrounds than our own, we tend to share less information with them than we do with people who share our cultural heritage.61
Misunderstanding and miscommunication occur between people from different cultures because of different coding rules and cultural norms, which play a major role in shaping patterns of interaction. The greater the difference between the cultures, the more likely it is that they will use different verbal and nonverbal codes. When you encounter a culture that has little in common with your own, you may experience culture shock, or a sense of confusion, anxiety, stress, and loss. If you are visiting or actually living in the new culture, your uncertainty and stress may take time to subside as you learn the values and codes that characterize the new culture. But if you are simply trying to communicate with someone from a background very different from your own—even on your home turf—you may find the suggestions in this section helpful in closing the communication gap.

The first step to bridging differences between cultures is to find out what hampers effective communication. What keeps people from connecting with those from other cultures? Sometimes it is different meanings created by different languages or by different interpretations of nonverbal messages. Sometimes it is the inability to stop focusing on oneself and begin focusing on the other. We’ll examine some of these barriers first, then discuss strategies and skills for overcoming them.

**Ethnocentrism**

All good people agree,
And all good people say,
All nice people like Us, are We,
And everyone else is They.

In a few short lines, Rudyard Kipling captured the essence of what sociologists and anthropologists call ethnocentric thinking. Members of all societies tend to believe that “All
nice people like Us, are We...” They find comfort in the familiar and often denigrate or distrust others. Of course, with training or experience in other climes, they may learn to transcend their provincialism, placing themselves in others’ shoes. Or, as Kipling put it,

... if you cross over the sea,
Instead of over the way,
You may end by (think of it!)
Looking on We
As only a sort of They.

In a real sense, a main lesson of intercultural communication is to begin to “cross over the sea,” to learn to understand why other people think and act as they do and to be able to empathize with their perspectives.64

Marilyn had always been intrigued by Russia. Her dream was to travel the country by train, spending time in small villages as well as exploring the cultural riches of Moscow, Pyatigorsk, and St. Petersburg. Her first day in Russia was a disappointment, however. When she arrived in Moscow, she joined a tour touting the cultural traditions of Russia. When the tour bus stopped at Sparrow Hills, affording the visitors a breathtaking hilltop view of the Moscow skyline, she was perplexed and mildly shocked to see a woman dressed in an elegant wedding gown mounted on horseback and galloping through the parking lot. Men in suits were cheering her on as a crowd of tipsy revelers set off fireworks and danced wildly to a brass band. “What kind of people are these?” sniffed Marilyn.

“Oh,” said the tour guide, “it is our custom to come here to celebrate immediately following the wedding ceremony.”

“But in public, with such raucousness?” queried Marilyn.

“It is our tradition,” said the guide.

“What a backward culture. They’re nothing but a bunch of peasants!” pronounced Marilyn, who was used to more refined nuptial celebrations at a country club or an exclusive hotel.

For the rest of the tour, Marilyn judged every Russian behavior as inferior to that of Westerners. That first experience colored her perceptions, and her ethnocentric view served as a barrier to effective interpersonal communication with the Russian people she met.

Ethnocentrism stems from a conviction that our own cultural traditions and assumptions are superior to those of others. It is the opposite of an other-orientation that embraces and appreciates the elements that give another culture meaning. This kind of cultural snobbism is one of the fastest ways to create a barrier that inhibits rather than enhances communication.

The concept of ethnocentrism is not new. One hundred years ago, W. G. Sumner defined it as “the technical name of this view of things in which one’s own group is the center of everything and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it.”65 Many scholars have found that virtually all cultural groups are ethnocentric to some degree.66 Some even argue that it’s not always bad to see one’s own cultural group as superior; an ethnocentric tendency enhances group pride and patriotism and encourages cultural traditions.67 A problem occurs, however, when a group views its own preferences as always the best way. Extreme ethnocentrism creates a barrier between the group and others.
Different Communication Codes

You are on your first trip to Los Angeles. As you step off the bus and look around for Hollywood Boulevard, you realize you have gotten off at the wrong stop. You see what looks like an old-fashioned corner grocery store with “Bodega” painted on a red sign. So you walk in and ask the man behind the counter, “How do I get to Hollywood Boulevard, please?”

“No hablo inglés,” says the man, smiling and shrugging his shoulders. But he points to a transit map pasted on the wall behind the counter.

Today, even when you travel within the United States, you are likely to encounter people who do not speak your language. Obviously, this kind of intercultural difference poses a formidable communication challenge. And even when you do speak the same language as someone else, he or she may come from a place where the words and gestures have different meanings. But, as William Gudykunst wisely noted, “If we understand each others’ languages, but not their cultures, we can make fluent fools of ourselves.”

Research has found that your culture and ethnic background have a direct effect on the way you listen to information from others. Ultimately, your ability to communicate effectively and appropriately depends on whether you can understand each other’s verbal and nonverbal codes.

In the preceding example, although the man behind the counter did not understand your exact words, he noted the cut of your clothing, your backpack, and your anxiety, and he deduced that you were asking directions. And you could understand what his gesture toward the transit map meant. Unfortunately, not every communication between speakers of two different languages is this successful.

Even when language is translated, meaning can be missed or mangled. Note the following examples of mistranslated advertisements:

- “Body by Fisher” in a General Motors auto ad became “Corpse by Fisher” in Flemish.
- A Colgate-Palmolive toothpaste named “Cue” was advertised in France before anyone realized that Cue also happened to be the name of a widely circulated pornographic book about oral sex.
- Pepsi-Cola’s “Come Alive with Pepsi” campaign, when it was translated for the Taiwanese market, conveyed the unsettling news that “Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the grave.”
- Parker Pen could not advertise its famous “Jotter” ballpoint pen in some languages because the translation sounded like “jockstrap” pen.
- One American airline operating in Brazil advertised that it had plush “rendezvous lounges” on its jets, unaware that in Portuguese (the language of Brazil), rendezvous implies a special room for making love.
The following measure of ethnocentrism was developed by communication researchers James Neuliep and James McCroskey. Answer the following questions honestly.

**Directions:** This instrument is composed of twenty-four statements concerning your feelings about your culture and other cultures. In the space provided to the left of each item, indicate the degree to which the statement applies to you by marking whether you (5) strongly agree, (4) agree, (3) are neutral, (2) disagree, or (1) strongly disagree with the statement. There are no right or wrong answers. Work quickly and record your first response.

1. Most other cultures are backward compared with my culture.
2. People in other cultures have a better lifestyle than we do in my culture.
3. Most people would be happier if they didn’t live like people do in my culture.
4. My culture should be the role model for other cultures.
5. Lifestyles in other cultures are just as valid as those in my culture.
6. Other cultures should try to be more like my culture.
7. I’m not interested in the values and customs of other cultures.
8. It is not wise for other cultures to look up to my culture.
9. People in my culture could learn a lot from people in other cultures.
10. Most people from other cultures just don’t know what’s good for them.
11. People from my culture act strange and unusual when they go into other cultures.

12. I have little respect for the values and customs of other cultures.
13. Most people would be happier if they lived like people in my culture.
14. People in my culture have just about the best lifestyles of anywhere.
15. My culture is backward compared with most other cultures.
16. My culture is a poor role model for other cultures.
17. Lifestyles in other cultures are not as valid as those in my culture.
18. My culture should try to be more like other cultures.
19. I’m very interested in the values and customs of other cultures.
20. Most people in my culture just don’t know what is good for them.
21. People in other cultures could learn a lot from people in my culture.
22. Other cultures are smart to look up to my culture.
23. I respect the values and customs of other cultures.
24. People from other cultures act strange and unusual when they come into my culture.

**Scoring:** To determine your ethnocentrism, reverse your score for items 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 11, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, and 23. For these items, 5 = 1, 4 = 2, 3 = 3, 2 = 4, and 1 = 5. That is, if your original score was a 5, change it to a 1. If your original score was a 4, change it to a 2, and so forth. Once you have reversed your score for these twelve items, add up all twenty-four scores. This is your generalized ethnocentrism score. Scores greater than 80 indicate high ethnocentrism. Scores of 50 and below indicate low ethnocentrism.

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**Stereotyping and Prejudice**

All Europeans dress fashionably.

All Asians are good at math.

All Americans like to drive big cars.

These statements are stereotypes. They are all inaccurate. As we discussed in Chapter 3, to **stereotype** someone is to push him or her into an inflexible, all-encompassing category. Our tendency to simplify sensory stimuli can lead us to adopt stereotypes as we interpret and label the behavior of others. As we also noted in Chapter 3, there is evidence that we thin slice—make judgments about others in just seconds based on nonverbal cues. One **stereotype** To place a person or group of persons into an inflexible, all-encompassing category.
study found that after viewing just 20 seconds of silent videotape, subjects made stereotyped, biased racial judgments of others.72 Stereotypes become a barrier to effective intercultural communication when we fail to consider the uniqueness of individuals, groups, or events. Two anthropologists suggest that every person is, in some respects, (1) like all other people, (2) like some other people, and (3) like no other people.73 The challenge when meeting others is to sort out how they are alike and how they are unique.

Can stereotypes play any useful role in interpersonal communication? It may sometimes be appropriate to draw on stereotypes, or generalizations drawn from limited instances. If, for example, you are alone and lost in a large city at two o’clock in the morning and another car aggressively taps your rear bumper, it would be prudent to try to drive away as quickly as possible, rather than to hop out of your car to make a new acquaintance. You would be wise to pre-judge that the other driver might have some malicious intent. In most situations, however, prejudice—a judgment or opinion of someone formed on the basis of stereotypes or before you know all the facts—inhibits effective communication, especially if your labels are inaccurate or assume superiority on your part.74

Communication author and consultant Leslie Aguilar notes that whether or not we intend to perpetuate stereotypes and prejudice, we do so in seemingly innocent ways.75 Here are some of the ways we may inadvertently stereotype others: telling jokes (“Have you heard the one about the minister and the rabbi?”); using labels (she’s a real “blue hair” or he’s “trailer trash”) or rigid descriptions (“crotchety old man” or “bad woman driver”); making assumptions (assuming, for example, that a woman’s career is less important than a man’s career, that men are insensitive, or that women are physically weak); relying on “spokesperson syndrome” (“Don, what do Hispanic people think about this topic?”); or making statistical overgeneralizations (“Statistics show that Chinese do well in math”).

Certain prejudices are widespread. Although there are slightly more females than males in the world, one study found that even when a male and a female hold the same type of job, the male’s job is considered more prestigious than the female’s.76 Today, gender and racial discrimination in hiring and promotion is illegal in the United States. But some people’s opinions have not kept pace with the law.

Assuming Similarities

Just as it is inaccurate to assume that all people who belong to another social group or class are worlds apart from you, it is usually erroneous to assume that others act and think just as you do. Cultural differences do exist. Research and our own observations support the commonsense conclusion that people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds do speak and behave differently.77 Even if they appear to be like you, all people are not alike. Although this statement is not profound, it has profound implications. People often make the mistake of assuming that others value the same things they do, maintaining a self-focused perspective instead of an other-oriented one. As you saw in Chapter 3, focusing on superficial factors such as appearance, clothing, and even a person’s occupation can lead to false impressions. Instead, you must take the time to explore a person’s background and cultural values before you can determine what you really have in common.

Assuming Differences

Although it may seem to contradict what we just noted about assuming similarities, another barrier to intercultural communication is to automatically assume that another person is different from you. It can be just as detrimental to communication to assume someone is different from you as it is to assume that others are similar to you. The fact is, human beings do share common experiences, while at the same time there are differences.
The point of noting that humans have similarities as well as differences is not to diminish the role of culture as a key element that influences communication, but to recognize that despite cultural differences, we are all members of the human family. The words communication and common resemble one another. We communicate effectively and appropriately when we can connect to others based on what we hold in common. Identifying common cultural issues and similarities can also help us establish common ground with others.

How are we all alike? Cultural anthropologist Donald Brown has compiled a list of hundreds of “surface” universals of behavior and language use that have been identified. According to Brown, people in all cultures

- Have beliefs about death.
- Have a childhood fear of strangers.
- Divide labor on the basis of sex.
- Experience envy, pain, jealousy, shame, and pride.
- Use facial expressions to express emotions.
- Have rules for etiquette.
- Experience empathy.
- Value some degree of collaboration or cooperation.
- Experience conflict and seek to manage or mediate conflict.

Of course, all cultures do not have the same beliefs about death, or divide labor according to sex in the same ways, but all cultures address these issues. Communication researcher David Kale believes that all humans seek to protect the dignity and worth of other people. Thus, he suggests, all people can identify with the struggle to enhance their own dignity and worth, although different cultures express that in different ways. A second common value that Kale notes is the search for a world at peace. Intercultural communication scholars Larry Samovar and Richard Porter suggest that there are other elements that cultures share. They note that people from all cultures seek physical pleasure as well as emotional and psychological pleasure and avoid personal harm. It’s true that each culture and each person decide what is pleasurable or painful; nonetheless, Samovar and Porter argue, all people operate within this pleasure–pain continuum.

Linguist and scholar Steven Pinker is another advocate of common human values. Drawing on the work of anthropologists Richard Shweder and Alan Fiske, Pinker suggests that the following value themes are universally present in some form or degree in societies across the globe:

- It is bad to harm others and good to help them.
- People have a sense of fairness; we should reciprocate favors, reward benefactors, and punish cheaters and those who do harm.
- People value loyalty to a group and sharing in a community or group.
- It is proper to defer to legitimate authority and to respect those with status and power.
- People should seek purity, cleanliness, and sanctity while shunning defilement and contamination.

In summary, “... avoidance of harm, fairness, community (or group loyalty), authority, and purity... are the primary colors of our moral senses.”

What are the practical implications of trying to identify common human values or characteristics? Here’s one implication: If you are speaking about an issue on which
you and another person fundamentally differ, identifying a larger common value—
such as the value of peace, prosperity, or the importance of family—can help you find
a foothold so that the other person will at least listen to your ideas. It’s useful, we be-
lieve, not just to categorize our differences but also to explore how human beings are
similar to one another. Discovering how we are alike can provide a starting point for
human understanding. Yes, we are all different, but we share things in common as
well. Communication effectiveness is diminished when we assume we’re all different
from one another in every aspect, just as communication is affected negatively if we
assume we’re all alike. We’re more complicated than that.

Improving Intercultural Communication Competence

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “We have to face the fact that either all of us are going to
die together or we are going to live together, and if we are to live together we have to
talk.” In essence, she was saying that to overcome differences people need effective
communication skills. It is not enough just to point to the barriers to effective inter-
cultural communication and say, “Don’t do that.” Although identifying the causes of
misunderstanding is a good first step to becoming interculturally competent, most
people need help with specific strategies to help them overcome these barriers. In this
book and in this chapter, we want to focus attention on the interpersonal communi-
cation strategies that can lead to intercultural communication competence.

Intercultural communication competence is the ability to adapt your behavior
toward another in ways that are appropriate to the other person’s culture. To be inter-
culturally competent is to be more than merely aware of what is appropriate or
simply sensitive to cultural differences. To be interculturally competent is to behave
toward others in ways that are appropriate. But prior to behaving appropriately, an
individual needs to have knowledge about another culture and the motivation to
adapt or modify his or her behavior.

Although we’ve identified stages in the process of becoming interculturally com-
petent, the question remains: How do you achieve intercultural communication
competence? The remaining portion of this chapter presents specific strategies to help
you bridge differences between you and people who have a different cultural per-
spective from yours.

You enhance your intercultural competence by doing what we introduced in
Chapter 1: You become knowledgeable, motivated, and skilled.

- Develop Appropriate Knowledge. One of the barriers to effective intercultural
  communication is having different communication codes. Improving your
  knowledge of how others communicate can reduce the impact of this barrier. We
  offer strategies to help you learn more about other cultures by actively pursuing
  information about others.

- Develop Motivation. Motivation is an internal state of readiness to respond to
  something. A competent communicator wants to learn and improve. Developing
  strategies to appreciate others who are different from you may help you appreci-
  ate different cultural approaches to communication and relationships. We sug-
  gest you endeavor to be tolerant of uncertainty and to avoid knee-jerk negative
  evaluations of others.

- Develop Skill. Developing skill in adapting to others focuses on specific behaviors
  that can help overcome barriers and cultural differences. As we discussed in
  Chapter 1, becoming other-oriented is critical to the process of relating to others.

\[\text{intercultural communication competence} \quad \text{Ability to adapt one’s behavior toward another in ways that are appropriate to the other person’s culture.}\]

\[\text{motivation} \quad \text{Internal state of readiness to respond to something.}\]

\[\text{skill} \quad \text{Behavior that improves the effectiveness or quality of communication with others.}\]
Do all of us experience and express emotions in the same way? The question of whether there are universal emotions or universal ways of expressing emotions has been studied and debated by scholars for decades.

One widely debated analysis, developed by psychologist Robert Plutchik and shown in Figure 4.1, suggests that there are eight primary human emotions: joy, acceptance, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, anger, and anticipation.\(^8\) These eight primary emotions can combine to produce eight secondary emotions. Although not all researchers agree that the eight primary emotions are the definitive set of human emotions, a host of scholars argue that yes, there is a set of basic emotions that all humans experience.\(^8\) They believe that through the biological process of evolution, all humans have a core set of emotional experiences. The debate about whether there are universal emotions boils down to whether you believe that nature (biology) or nurture (culture) determines common, core emotions. Those who think we are “wired” or programmed for common emotions believe that biology is the predominant influence in determining how we both interpret emotional expression and respond emotionally.

Researcher Paul Ekman has spent many years working with several colleagues to determine if people from a wide variety of cultures all interpret facial expressions of emotion in the same way. His conclusion: “Our evidence, and that of others, shows only that when people are experiencing strong emotions, are not making any attempt to mask their expressions, the expression will be the same regardless of age, race, culture, sex and education. That is a powerful finding.”\(^9\)

Other researchers have reached a different conclusion.\(^9\) When critically examining the evidence of Paul Ekman and others, they have found that culture does play an important role in determining how facial expressions are displayed and interpreted.\(^5\) There is some evidence, for example, that people from collectivistic cultures are socialized to not express emotions that would disrupt harmony in the group. Specifically, people with collectivist values may work harder at regulating how they express such emotions as anger, contempt, and disgust—emotions that would hinder group peace.\(^3\) And people from individualistic cultures may feel that they have greater cultural license to express these emotions more freely.

FIGURE 4.1
Robert Plutchik’s Model of Emotions

Develop Knowledge

Knowledge is power. To increase your knowledge of others who are different from you, we suggest that you actively seek information about others, ask questions and listen for the answers, and establish common ground.

Seek Information. Seeking information about a culture or even about a specific communication situation enhances the quality of intercultural communication. Why?
Because seeking information helps manage the uncertainty and anxiety that we may feel when we interact with people who are different from us.93 Sometimes we feel uncomfortable in intercultural communication situations because we just don’t know how to behave. We aren’t sure what our role should be; we can’t quite predict what will happen when we communicate with others because we’re in a new or strange situation. Seeking new information can help counter inaccurate information and prejudice.

As we’ve noted, every person has a worldview based on cultural beliefs about the universe and key issues such as death, God, and the meaning of life.94 These beliefs shape our thoughts, language, and behavior. Only through intercultural communication can we hope to understand how each individual views the world. As you speak to a person from another culture, think of yourself as a detective watching for implied, often unspoken messages that provide information about the values, norms, roles, and rules of that person’s culture.

You can also prepare yourself by studying the culture. If you are going to another country, courses in the history, anthropology, art, or geography of that place can give you a head start on communicating with understanding. Learn not only from books and magazines, but also from individuals whenever possible.

Given the inextricable link between language and culture, the more you learn about another language, the more you will understand the traditions and customs of the culture. Politicians have long known the value of using even a few words of their constituents’ language. President Kennedy impressed and excited a crowd in Berlin by proclaiming, “Ich bin ein Berliner” (“I am a Berliner”). Even though his diction was less than perfect, he conveyed the message that he identified with his listeners. Speaking even a few words can signify your interest in learning about the language and culture of others.

Ask Questions and Listen Effectively. When you encounter a person from another background, asking questions and then pausing to listen is a simple technique for gathering information and also for confirming the accuracy of your expectations and assumptions. For example, some cultures, such as the Japanese culture, have clear expectations regarding gift giving. It is better to ask what these expectations are than to assume that your good old down-home manners will see you through.

When you ask questions, be prepared to share information about yourself, too. Otherwise, your partner may feel that you are interrogating him or her as a way to gain power and dominance rather than from a sincere desire to learn about cultural rules and norms.

Communication helps to reduce the uncertainty that is present in any relationship.95 When you meet people for the first time, you may be uncertain about who they are and what they like and dislike. When you communicate with someone from another culture, the uncertainty level is particularly high. As you begin to interact, you exchange information that helps you develop greater understanding. If you continue to ask questions, eventually you will feel less uncertain about how the person is likely to behave.

Just asking questions and sharing information about yourself are not sufficient to bridge differences in culture and background. It is equally important to listen to what others share. In the next chapter, we provide specific strategies for improving your listening skills.

Create a “Third Culture.” Several researchers suggest that one of the best ways to enhance understanding when communicating over a period of time with someone from a different cultural background is to develop a third culture. This is created when the communication partners join aspects of separate cultures to create a third, “new” culture that is more comprehensive and inclusive than either of the two separate cultures.96

According to one intercultural communication researcher, F. L. Casmir, a third-culture approach to enhancing the quality of intercultural communication occurs...
when the people involved in the conversation construct “a mutually benefi-
cial interactive environment in which individuals from two different cultures
can function in a way beneficial to all involved.”

How do you go about developing a third culture? In a word: talk. A third
culture does not just happen all at once; it evolves from dialogue. The commu-
icators construct a third culture together. After they realize that cultural differ-
ences may divide them, they may develop a third culture by making a conscious
effort to develop common assumptions and common perspectives for the rela-
tionship. Dialogue, negotiation, conversation, interaction, and a willingness to
let go of old ways and experiment with new frameworks are the keys to develop-
ing a third culture as a basis for a new relationship.

Developing a third-culture mentality can reduce our tendency to ap-
proach cultural differences from an “us-versus-them” point of view. Rather
than trying to eliminate communication barriers stemming from two differ-
ent sets of experiences, adopting a third-culture framework creates a new un-
derstanding of the other on the part of both participants.

Consider the example of Marsha, a businesswoman from Lincoln, Ne-
braska, and Tomiko, a businesswoman from Tokyo, Japan. In the context of
their business relationship, it would be difficult for them to develop a compre-
hensive understanding of each other’s cultural traditions. However, if they
openly acknowledged the most significant of these differences and sought to cre-
ate a third culture by identifying explicit rules and norms for their interaction,
they might be able to develop a more comfortable relationship with each other.

As described by communication researcher Benjamin Broome, the third
culture “is characterized by unique values and norms that may not have existed
prior to the dyadic [two-person] relationship.” Broome labels the essence of this new
relationship relational empathy, which permits varying degrees of understanding,
rather than requiring complete comprehension of another’s culture or emotions.

The cultural context includes all the elements of the culture (learned behaviors
and rules, or “mental software”) that affect the interaction. Do you come from a cul-
ture that takes a tea break each afternoon at 4 P.M.? Does your culture value hard work
and achievement, or relaxation and enjoyment? Creating a third culture acknowledges
the different cultural contexts and interactions participants have experienced and
seeks to develop a new context for future interaction.

**Develop Motivation: Strategies to Accept Others**

Competent communicators want to learn and improve. They are motivated to en-
hance their ability to relate to others and to accept others as they are. A key to accept-
ing others is to develop a positive attitude of tolerance and acceptance of those who
are different from you. We suggest three strategies to help improve your acceptance
and appreciation of others who differ from you: Tolerate ambiguity, become mindful,
and avoid negative judgments of others.

**Tolerate Ambiguity.** Communicating with someone from another culture pro-
duces uncertainty. It may take time and several exchanges to clarify a message. Be pa-
tient and try to expand your capacity to tolerate ambiguity if you are speaking to
someone with a markedly different worldview.

When Ken and Rita visited Miami from Peoria, they asked their hotel concierge
to direct them to a church of their faith, and they wound up at one with a predomi-
nantly Haitian congregation. They were not prepared for the exuberant chanting and
verbal interchanges with the minister during the sermon. They weren’t certain
whether they should join in or simply sit quietly and observe. Ken whispered to Rita,
“I’m not sure what to do. Let’s just watch and see what is expected of us.” In the end, they chose to sit and clap along with the chanting rather than to become actively involved in the worship. Rita felt uncomfortable and conspicuous, though, and had to fight the urge to bolt. But after the service, several members of the congregation came up to greet Ken and Rita, invited them to lunch, and expressed great happiness in their visit. “You know,” said Rita later in the day, “I’m so grateful that we sat through our discomfort. We might never have met those terrific people. Now I understand why their worship is so noisy—they’re just brimming with joy.”

Be Mindful. “Our life is what our thoughts make it,” said Marcus Aurelius in Meditations. As we noted in Chapter 3, to be mindful is to be consciously aware of what you are doing, thinking, and sensing. With regard to cultural differences, to be mindful is to acknowledge that there is a connection between thoughts and deeds when you interact with a person from a background different from your own. William Gudykunst suggests that being mindful is one of the best ways to approach any new cultural encounter. Remember that there are and will be cultural differences, and try to keep them in your consciousness. Also try to consider the other individual’s frame of reference, or worldview, and to use his or her cultural priorities and assumptions when you are communicating. Adapt your behavior to minimize cultural noise and distortion.

You can become more mindful through self-talk, something we discussed in Chapter 2. Self-talk consists of messages you tell yourself to help you manage your emotions or discomfort with a certain situation. Imagine that you are working on a group project with several classmates. One classmate, Suji, was born in Iran. When interacting with you, he consistently stands about a foot away from you, whereas you are more comfortable with three or four feet between you. When Suji encroaches on your space, you could be mindful of the reason for this behavior by mentally noting, “Suji sure likes to get close to people when he talks to them. This may be how they do things in his culture.” This self-talk message makes you consciously aware that there may be a difference in your interaction styles. If you still feel uncomfortable, instead of blurting out, “Hey, man, why so close?” you could express your own preferences with an “I” message: “Suji, I’d prefer a bit more space between us when we talk.”

Avoid Negative Judgments.

American tourist on her first visit to France:

Can you believe it? How repulsive! These people actually eat horse meat and think it’s a delicacy.

Black teenager watching his White classmates dance:

Man, they don’t know anything about good music! And those dances are so dumb. I don’t call this a party.

Japanese businessperson visiting Argentina:

These people are never on time. No wonder they can never catch up to us.

German student, after watching a documentary about life in Japan:

No wonder they work so hard. They have dinky little houses. I’d work long hours too if I had to live like that.

The kind of ethnocentrism that underlies judgments like these is a communication barrier. It is also an underlying cause of suspicion and mistrust and, in extreme cases, a spark that ignites violence. Instead of making judgments about another culture, try simply to acknowledge differences and to view them as interesting challenges rather than as obstacles to be eradicated.
It’s clear that there are cultural differences among the world’s people and that these differences have existed since there have been people. Anthropologists and communication scholars who study intercultural communication teach us the value of adapting to cultural differences in order to understand others better. But are there any universal values that are or have been embraced by all humans? The question is not a new one; scholars, theologians, and many others have debated for millennia whether there are any universal underpinnings for all human societies. In Chapter 3 we noted that social psychologists Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson suggest that people from all cultures have a universal need to be treated with politeness. Are there other needs and values that all humans share? To uncover such commonalities is to develop a truly human communication theory rather than a theory that applies to a specific cultural context.

C. S. Lewis, a British scholar, author, and educator who taught at both Oxford University and Cambridge University, argued that there are universal ethical and moral principles that undergird all societies of civilized people, regardless of their religious beliefs, cultural background, or government structure. He suggested that the existence of Natural Laws, or what he called a Tao—a universal moral code—informs human ethical decisions. In his book The Abolition of Man, Lewis presented eight universal principles, or laws. He did not claim that all societies have followed these laws—many of them have been clearly violated and continue to be violated today—but he did suggest they provide a bedrock of values against which all societies may be measured. Here are his eight laws:

1. The Law of General Beneficence: Do not murder, be dishonest, or take from others what does not belong to us.
2. The Law of Special Beneficence: Value your family members.
3. Duties to Parents, Elders, and Ancestors: Especially hold your parents, those who are a generation older than you, and your ancestors with special honor and esteem.
4. Duties to Children and Posterity: We have a special obligation to respect the rights of the young and to value those who will come after us.
5. The Law of Justice: Honor the basic human rights of others; each person is of worth.
7. The Law of Mercy: Be compassionate to those less fortunate than you are.
8. The Law of Magnanimity: Avoid unnecessary violence against other people.

To support his argument that these are universal values, Lewis offered quotations from several well-known sources, including religious, historical, and political writings, both contemporary and centuries old. Lewis implied that these eight laws may be viewed as a universal Bill of Rights, and that they constitute an underlying set of principles that either implicitly or explicitly guide all civilized society. Do you agree? Is it useful to search for underlying principles of humanness? Despite cultural differences, are there underlying values or principles that should inform our interactions with others? Is there truly a universal human theory of communication? Or might it do more harm than good to suggest that universal principles underlie what it means to behave and communicate appropriately and effectively?

Develop Skill

To be skilled is to be capable of putting into action what you know and want to achieve. The skills underlying being interculturally competent are the ability to be flexible, to be other-oriented, and to adapt your communication to others. We discuss these crucial skills as an introduction to the communication skills that we present in the next four chapters.

Develop Creative Flexibility. When you encounter someone who comes from a very different background, remember Dorothy’s famous line from The Wizard of Oz and remind yourself that you’re “not in Kansas anymore.” You can no longer rely on the assumptions of your own cultural heritage. Rather than relying on “scripts” you would use “back home in Kansas,” it’s important to be flexible and respond in creative and inventive ways. You may read guidebooks to prepare you for new cultural experiences, but you can only learn so much from books; you must be willing to learn as you communicate on the spot. Although in this chapter we’ve identified generalizations about different cultural groups, we caution you that these are only generalizations. Every individual is unique, so generalizations that you learn from research will not always apply. For example, it would be inappropriate to automatically assume that someone from Japan will value collectivism instead of individual achievement. Many members of minority groups in the United States find it tiresome to correct these generalizations in their encounters with others. If you’re
It’s important to be flexible in your responses to other cultures and people with different backgrounds. Traveling in other countries can hone your intercultural communication skills.

African American, gay, lesbian, or from a rural community, you may be weary of someone asking what “you people” think about a particular issue, as if you spoke for all members of your cultural or co-cultural group. Because each person is unique, it’s important to treat each person not as a representative of a monolithic group, but as someone with a distinct perspective.

The skill of observing and responding with creative flexibility enhances your intercultural competence. It also calls on your ability to do a variety of things simultaneously. While you’re listening to someone, you’re also adapting your behavior to respond to the person’s cultural expectations. To multitask takes both creativity and flexibility. There is evidence that as you gain experience and skill in interacting with people from other cultural backgrounds, you develop an expanded repertoire of behaviors to enhance your intercultural competence. Research further suggests that the amount of culture shock you experience when communicating with someone from a different culture decreases as you develop skills in interacting with people from that culture.104

How do you develop these skills? By developing the knowledge, motivation, and behaviors that enhance the quality of your relationships with others. You’ll need to pay close attention to the other person’s nonverbal cues when you begin conversing (Is the person attentive? Does the person look interested? Confused?); then adjust your communication style and language, if necessary, to put the person at ease. Listen and respond and, if necessary, as we noted earlier, create a new culture—a third culture—to forge a new way of interacting. You may, for example, prefer direct eye contact when you speak with another person, but someone from a different culture may prefer less direct eye contact. So you may need to modify the amount of eye contact you have with that person. As communication researchers Kathy Domenici and Stephen Littlejohn advocate, “Good intercultural communication requires a certain creativity, an ability to create new forms that bridge established cultural patterns.”105
Don’t go on “automatic pilot” when interacting with anyone—but, especially people from a different cultural context.

**Become Other-Oriented.** Throughout the book, we have emphasized the importance of becoming other-oriented—focusing on others rather than yourself—as an important way to enhance your interpersonal competence. We have also discussed the problems ethnocentrism can create when you attempt to communicate with others, especially with people whose culture differs from yours.

Although our focus in this discussion is on how to increase other-orientation in intercultural interactions, the principles apply to all interpersonal interactions. The major difference between intercultural interactions and those that occur within your own culture is primarily the obviousness of the differences between you and the other person.

To become other-oriented is to do two things: first, to take into account another person’s thoughts and perspective, and second, to consider what the other person may be experiencing emotionally. These are skills we’ve emphasized before. The first skill is called social decentering. The second skill is empathy.

**Social decentering** is a cognitive process in which you take into account the other person’s thoughts, values, background, and overall perspective. The greater the difference between you and another person, the more difficult it is to accomplish social decentering. As you meet someone from a different culture, ask yourself, “What might this person be thinking right now?” Of course, since you’re not a mind reader, you won’t be able to know definitively what someone is thinking. But you can think about what most people that you know might be thinking, or draw on your own experiences. But keep the other person’s worldview and cultural values in mind as you make inferences about his or her cognitive perspective. After considering his or her cognitive point of view, consider what the person may be experiencing emotionally.

**Empathy** is an emotional reaction that is similar to the one being experienced by another person. Empathy is about emotions, whereas social decentering is about

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**BEING Other-Oriented**

Being other-oriented does not mean becoming a “wishy-washy” person who only says or does what the other person wants. When you are other-oriented, you maintain your own sense of ethics and values while considering the needs and interests of others. Identify situations in which you have thought about what another person might want, yet have mindfully chosen to do something contrary to what the other person may have wanted. Do you think you can be other-oriented but not always do what another person wants you to do?

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**Building Your Skills**

What are the typical norms and rules that you expect when communicating with people in your own cultural and ethnic group in the following situations?

Norms and rules regarding punctuality at meetings:

Norms and rules regarding greetings between good friends:

Norms and rules regarding giving and receiving gifts among friends:

Norms and rules regarding giving and receiving gifts among business associates:

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**Identifying and Adapting to Cultural Rules and Norms**

Norms and rules regarding typical times for daily meals:

Norms and rules regarding appropriate use of someone’s first name:

Share your answers with your classmates. Note the similarities and differences in your responses, both among people who share common cultural and ethnic backgrounds and among people who have different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Which of the skills for enhancing intercultural competence discussed on pages 109–112 would help you adapt to the different rules and expectations?
cognitive processes. You develop empathy as you draw on your own experiences (what you might be feeling), your knowledge of other people in general, and what you know about the specific person you are interacting with. Some suggest that it’s impossible to ever experience the emotions of another person with complete confidence and accuracy. We agree. But to be empathic is to do your best to put yourself in someone else’s place emotionally and consider what that person is feeling. Being in touch emotionally is hard work, and some people are just naturally more empathic toward others.

**Appropriately Adapt Your Communication.** The logical extension of being flexible and becoming other-oriented is to adapt your communication to enhance the quality and effectiveness of your interpersonal communication. To **adapt** means to adjust your behavior to others to accommodate differences and expectations. Appropriate adaptation occurs in the context of the relationship you have with the other person and what is happening in the communication environment. Communication accommodation theory suggests that all people adapt their behavior to others to some extent. Those who adapt to others appropriately and sensitively are more likely to experience more positive communication. Adapting to others doesn’t mean you only tell others what they want to hear and do what others want you to do. Nor are we suggesting that you adapt your behavior only so that you can get your way; the goal is effective communication, not manipulation. We are suggesting, rather, that you be aware of what your communication partner is doing and saying, especially if there are cultural differences between you, so that your message is understood and you don’t unwittingly offend the other person. Although it may seem to be common sense, being sensitive to others and adapting behaviors to others is not as common as you might think.

Sometimes people adapt their behavior based on what they think someone will like. At other times, they adapt their communication after realizing they have done something wrong. When you modify your behavior in anticipation of an event, you **adapt predictively.** For example, you might decide to buy a friend flowers to soften the news about breaking a date because you know how much your friend likes flowers. When you modify your behavior after an event, you **adapt reactively.** For example, you might buy your friend flowers to apologize after a fight.

You often adapt your messages to enhance message clarity. There are at least four reasons that explain why you may adapt your communication with another person.

- **Information:** You adapt your message in response to specific information that you already know about your partner, such as what he or she may like or dislike, or information that your partner has shared with you.
- **Perceived Behavior:** You adapt your communication in response to what you think the other person is thinking, what you see the person doing, and your observations of the person’s emotional expressions and moods.
- **History:** You adapt your messages to others based on previous conversations, past shared experiences, and personal information that others have shared with you.
- **Communication Context:** You adapt your message depending on where you are; you may whisper a brief comment to someone during a movie, yet shout a comment to someone when attending a loud rock concert.

In intercultural interactions, people frequently adapt communication in response to the feedback or reactions they are receiving during a conversation. An other-oriented communicator is constantly looking at and listening to the other person in order to appropriately adapt his or her communication behavior. Table 4.2 describes how we adapt our verbal messages to others and provides some examples.

People in conversations also adapt to nonverbal cues. Many times, they raise or lower voice volume in response to the volume of a partner, or lean toward people in response to their leaning toward the speaker. We talk more about such nonverbal cues in Chapter 7.
Adaptation across intercultural contexts is usually more difficult than adaptation within your own culture. Imagine shaking hands with a stranger and having the stranger hold on to your hand as you continue to talk. In the United States, hand holding between strangers violates nonverbal norms. But in some cultures, maintaining physical contact while talking is expected. Pulling your hand away from this person would be rude. What may be mannerly in one culture is not always acceptable in another. Adapting to these cultural differences means developing that “third culture” that we talked about earlier in the chapter.

Taking an other-oriented approach to communication means considering the thoughts, feelings, background, perspectives, attitudes, and values of your partners and adjusting your interaction with them accordingly. Other-orientation leads to more effective interpersonal communication, regardless of whether you are dealing with someone in your family or a person from another country.

In an effective interpersonal relationship, your partner is also orienting himself or herself to you. A competent communicator has knowledge of others, is motivated to enhance the quality of communication, and possesses the skill of being other-oriented.

If you learn the skills and principles we have presented here, will it really make a difference in your ability to relate to others? Evidence suggests that the answer is yes. A study by communication researcher Lori Carrell found that students who had been

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**TABLE 4.2 How Do We Adapt to Others?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Adaptation</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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| Adapting the Topic and Level of Intimacy of Your Conversation | • Talking about a class you both attend  
• Mentioning an article you read about a TV show your partner really likes  
• Telling someone about your depression because you believe he or she cares |
| Adapting How You Explain or Describe Something | • Telling a story about Ike, whom your partner doesn’t know, and explaining that Ike is your uncle  
• Describing Facebook to your grandparent, who doesn’t know what the Internet is  
• Telling someone, “I know my behavior might seem a little erratic, but I’m under a lot of pressure at work right now and my parents are on my case” |
| Adapting by Withholding or Avoiding Information | • Not elaborating on the parts of an auto engine when describing a car problem because you know your partner is knowledgeable about cars  
• Not telling someone you saw his or her lover with someone else because he or she would be hurt  
• Not mentioning your interest in a mutual friend because you know the listener would blab about it to the mutual friend |
| Adapting Your Use of Examples, Comparisons, and Analogies | • Describing a person your partner doesn’t know by comparing the person to someone your partner knows  
• Explaining roller blading by comparing it to ice skating because your partner is an avid ice skater |
| Adapting Through Your Choice of Language | • Using formal address in response to status differences: “Thank you, Professor Smith”  
• Using slang when the relationship is perceived as informal  
• Using nicknames, inside jokes, or teasing comments with close friends |

exposed to lessons in empathy linked to a study of interpersonal and intercultural communication improved their ability to empathize with others.\textsuperscript{109} There is evidence that if you master these principles and skills, you will be rewarded with greater insight and ability to relate to others who are different from you.

### RECAP How to Improve Your Intercultural Communication Competence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Develop Knowledge</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actively Seek Information</td>
<td>Learn about the worldview of someone from another culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen and Ask Questions</td>
<td>Reduce uncertainty by asking for clarification and listening to the answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create a Third Culture</td>
<td>Create common ground by merging aspects of both cultural traditions to develop a common understanding</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Develop Motivation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tolerate Ambiguity</td>
<td>Take your time, and expect some uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be Mindful</td>
<td>Be conscious of cultural differences, rather than ignoring the differences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avoid Negative Judgments</td>
<td>Resist thinking that your culture has all the answers</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Develop Skill</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Be Creatively Flexible</td>
<td>Learn as you interact, and be willing to adjust your behavior as you learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Become Other-Oriented</td>
<td>Put yourself in the other person’s mental position (social decentering) and emotional mindset (empathizing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adapt Your Communication</td>
<td>Adjust your behavior to others to ethically accommodate differences and expectations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### APPLYING AN OTHER-ORIENTATION to Diversity: The Platinum Rule

When interacting with someone who is dramatically different from you, if you want to be truly other-oriented, you may need to go beyond what is known to most Westerners as “The Golden Rule”: “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” Or, as succinctly stated by the Buddha, “Consider others as yourself.” In Chapter 2 on page 37 we identified additional interpretations of the same principle from a variety of religious traditions. But when interacting with someone who is quite different from you, treating him or her as you’d like to be treated may not achieve relational benefits. If you like hip-hop music but your friend prefers Mozart, taking her to a Mos Def concert may make you feel good about following the Golden Rule (that’s how you’d like to be treated)—but the concert might be painful for her if she’d rather be listening to Mozart’s Horn Quintet in E flat, K. 407. Whether it’s taste in music or food, greeting rituals, or a host of other culturally determined behaviors, the ultimate other-oriented behavior would be what communication researcher Milton Bennett calls the Platinum Rule: Do to others as they themselves would like to be treated.\textsuperscript{110} Rather than treating people as you would like to be treated, interact with others the way you think they would like to be treated. According to Bennett, at its essence, empathy is “the imaginative, intellectual and emotional participation in another person’s experience.”\textsuperscript{111} The goal, according to Bennett, is to attempt to think and feel what another person thinks and feels and to go beyond that by taking positive action toward others in response to your empathic feelings.

But is the Platinum Rule always helpful, or even possible? As you ponder the virtues and challenges of becoming other-oriented and adapting your communication behavior to enhance your intercultural communication competence, consider the following questions:

- Is the Platinum Rule always desirable? Are there situations when it would be inappropriate to follow the Platinum Rule? Explain your answer.
- What are some obstacles to applying the Platinum Rule, especially with people who are culturally different from you?
- How can the Platinum Rule be useful when you are having a disagreement with another person?
- Think about a time when you applied the Platinum Rule. What was the effect on the person with whom you were communicating?
Understanding Diversity: Describing Our Differences (pages 87–93)

As we increasingly interact and communicate with people who are different from us, we must learn ways to appreciate and understand those differences and to bridge them in our interpersonal relationships. Our everyday world presents us with differences in gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, age, and social class, all of which can influence how we communicate with and relate to others.

Key Terms
- Sex 88
- Ethnicity 90
- Gender 88
- Discrimination 91
- Race 90

Critical Thinking Questions
1. What type of diversity do you find on campus? In the workplace? In your community? Do you find that you communicate differently with people from different groups and cultures? Explain.
2. How have gender differences played a role in your own communication or interactions with others? Explain.
3. Ethics: When Wayne, a Catholic Polish American, went to visit Dave, who was from an old Southern Baptist family, Dave’s dad made a bigoted statement about African Americans. This upset Wayne, and he wondered whether Dave’s father was prejudiced against Catholics, too. Should Wayne have spoken up and told Dave’s dad that he did not like the remark? What would be the best way to approach such a discussion?

Activities
How well do you think you could predict someone’s reactions to finding out that a parent or another close relative had just died? Rank-order each of the following from 1 (the person whose reaction you would be least confident about predicting) to 6 (the person whose reaction you would be most confident about predicting).

a. _____ A close friend of your own sex, age, race, and cultural background
b. _____ A sixty-year-old male Chinese farmer
c. _____ A college student twenty years older than you, but of your own race, sex, and cultural background
d. _____ A ten-year-old girl from California who is the daughter of Asian and Latino parents
e. _____ A college student of a different race but your own age, cultural background, and sex
f. _____ A college student of the opposite sex but your own age, race, and cultural background

Which characteristics of each person do you believe provide the best information on which to base your judgments? Why? What would you need to know about each person to feel comfortable in making a prediction? How could you get that information?

Understanding Culture: Dimensions of Our Mental Software (pages 93–97)

Culture is a learned system of knowledge, behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, values, and norms shared by a group of people. Culture influences how we process information and make sense of the world. Researchers have identified six dimensions common to all cultures they have studied: individualism versus collectivism, reliance on context, masculinity versus femininity, comfort with uncertainty, approach to power, and approach to time.

Key Terms
- Culture 93
- High-context culture 95
- Worldview 93
- Low-context culture 95
- Co-culture 94
- Masculine culture 95
- Enculturation 94
- Feminine culture 95
- Cultural context 95

Critical Thinking Questions
1. Name the co-cultures to which you belong. Would you describe your co-cultures as low- or high-context, masculine or feminine? Explain. What beliefs and norms characterize these co-cultures? What does your culture or co-culture value?
2. Ethics: Is it ethical or appropriate for someone from one culture to attempt to change the cultural values of someone from a different culture? For example, consider the case in which children living on a Texas ranch owned by a polygamous religious sect were taken from their families for suspected abuse, which was in the news in 2008: Is it right for others to attempt to make someone from another culture or with a different value system change his or her ways?

Activities
Bring to class a fable, folktale, or children’s story from a culture other than your own. As a group, analyze the cultural values implied by the story or characters in the story.

Barriers to Effective Intercultural Communication and Improving Intercultural Communication Competence (pages 97–114)

Research indicates that culture has a direct effect on how we communicate with one another. The greater the difference in culture,
the greater the potential for misunderstanding and miscommunication. Different communication codes, including different languages and interpretations of verbal and nonverbal messages, can be barriers to effective communication with those from cultures different from our own. Likewise, an ethnocentric view that one’s own culture is superior to others can be a barrier. You can improve your intercultural communication competence by developing knowledge about others, developing motivation to understand others, and developing skill and adapting your communication and behavior with others in appropriate ways.

Key Terms
Intercultural communication 97
Culture shock 98
Ethnocentrism 99
Stereotype 101
Prejudice 102
Intercultural communication competence 104
Motivation 104
Skill 104
Third culture 106
Relational empathy 107
Mindful 108
Social decentering 111
Empathy 111
Adapt 112
Communication accommodation theory 112
Adapt predictively 112
Adapt reactively 112

Critical Thinking Questions
1. What is the problem in assuming that other people are like us? How does this create a barrier to effective intercultural communication?

2. Jonna, an American, has just been accepted as a foreign exchange student in Germany. What potential cultural barriers may she face? How should she manage these potential barriers?

3. Ethics: What are appropriate ways to deal with someone who consistently utters racial slurs and displays prejudice toward racial and ethnic groups?

Activities
In small groups, identify examples from your own experiences of each barrier to effective intercultural communication discussed in the text. Use one of the examples as the basis for a skit to perform for the rest of the class. See whether the class can identify which intercultural barrier your group is depicting. Also, suggest how the skills and principles discussed in the chapter might have improved the communication in the situation you role-play.

Web Resources
http://chocd.umsl.edu The Center for Human Origin and Cultural Diversity provides suggestions for the development of social justice and cultural awareness curricula.